AFTER THE VOTE: THE FIGHT FOR RANK-AND-FILE POWER IS JUST BEGINNING



BY WILL LEHMAN
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Watch the video: youtu.be/jSDQwB8a9NU

On Sunday, October 4, I held my second online meeting, “The way forward after the vote: A rank-and-file strategy to fight job cuts, war and dictatorship.” The ballots in the UAW election were coming in. So were layoff notices across the industry. Both set the tone for the discussion.

The questions came from the floor. Workers spoke from the Nexteer plant in Saginaw; from my own plant at Mack Trucks; from GM Flint Assembly; from the picket line at National Steel Car in Hamilton, Ontario; from GM Silao in Mexico; from the US Postal Service; and from the railroads. A delegation of striking Bradford White workers from Middleville, Michigan joined the audience.

I opened the meeting by saying why I am running: **for workers to take power,** to build rank-and-file committees in every plant, linked across borders through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

That is what our campaign has fought for. When Canadian wildfire smoke filled the plants, we called on workers to act while Fain and Boyer told them to keep working. We stood with the Nexteer workers who voted down three sellout contracts. When the apparatus answered my campaign with a death threat, we took the demand to remove UAW International staffer Raymond Jensen to workers in every country, and we forced the Monitor and the apparatus to remove him.

That is what rank-and-file power looks like. But it was never about one bureaucrat.

The experience with Fain has settled the question. The stand-up strike was a fraud, the 2023 contract opened the door to thousands of job cuts, and four Detroit Three workers died on the job. **The apparatus cannot be reformed.** It has to be dismantled and replaced by the organized power of the workers ourselves.

The old labor song asked, “Which side are you on?” You cannot be on both sides. No more class collaboration with the shareholders. They see us as numbers, more expendable than the machines in the plant.

I also wanted workers to see what the companies are already doing. In China, robots assemble EVs in “dark factories” that need no lights because they need no workers. Ford’s Louisville automation overhaul means around 600 fewer jobs. GM installed dozens of cobots at Factory Zero while more than 1,000 workers sat on layoff. The union officials answer with demands for a “seat at the table” for themselves, to negotiate the terms of your elimination.

Technology is not our enemy. Under capitalism every advance in productivity is used against us. Workers will only benefit from these advances when they are taken out of private hands and made the property of the working class. That is what socialism means. The CEOs and the shareholders can work like the rest of us.

The figures tell the story: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in the second quarter of 2026 workers received the lowest share of national income since records began in 1947.

What is missing is not the will to fight. Workers have rejected UAW-backed contracts at Nexteer, Dana and Bridgewater. Bradford White workers are on strike. Millions have marched across Europe against war and austerity. What is missing is political leadership.

Nobody is coming to save any of us, including me. **This movement will be led by workers or it will not be led at all.**

"IT'S NOT ENOUGH JUST TO BE ANGRY WITH THE UAW LEADERS"

The first question came from a leader of the Nexteer Workers Rank-and-File Committee. She asked how to explain socialism to a new committee member. My answer was that it starts with a simple question: who should control production, the workers who produce the wealth or the shareholders?

The Nexteer worker then described what the committee has learned since the apparatus pushed a fourth contract through at her plant under the threat of job losses. "It's not enough just to be angry with the UAW leaders," she said. "It's time for the workers to stand strong together and build up the rank-and-file committee."

She also raised the case of Antoine Sanders, a worker with 10 years in the plant, who was fired the same day he spoke up against the contract to the UAW's international servicing rep at a rollout meeting. "I feel like there's more solidarity between the union leaders and management than there is between the union leaders and the workers on the floor," she said.

She is right, and it is a class question. Someone like Shawn Fain making more than a quarter million dollars a year, or anyone who replaces him, will have the same orientation. That is why I said back in June 2022 that this is not about replacing one bureaucrat with another.

Joe, who built the Mack Trucks Rank-and-File Committee with me and helped lead our rejection of a UAW-backed contract in 2023, said the companies take back what we won "a little at a time, so it goes unnoticed." The only answer is to organize across borders so there is nowhere left to run for cheaper labor. "This is the working class throughout the world," he said. "That's what everyone has to concentrate on."

Anna, who works at GM Flint Assembly, pointed out that the 90th anniversary of the Flint sit-down strike is coming up. The UAW is marking it with a commemorative T-shirt and nothing about what made it matter: workers organizing themselves, occupying the plants and taking control of production.

I reminded Anna that the founders of the UAW were socialists. Every gain autoworkers ever won was won by socialist-minded militants on the basis of class struggle. Every loss has come from bureaucrats who support capitalism, promote nationalism and accept partnership with the companies.

"I HAVE MORE IN COMMON WITH MY MEXICAN WORKER BROTHER THAN WITH AN AMERICAN BILLIONAIRE"

AJ Pearson from the National Steel Car Rank-and-File Committee joined us from Hamilton, Ontario, where railroad car workers are entering the ninth week of a strike with no negotiations. "Our union president two weeks ago told us basically that an act of solidarity would be to go out and get a job," he said. "That's United Steelworkers solidarity for you."

Down the street from him, Stelco, owned by Cleveland-Cliffs, whose CEO is a loud supporter of Trump's tariffs, just announced it was cutting as many as 500 of the remaining 750 workers at the mill, which once employed nearly 20,000. AJ asked what I make of Fain cheering on Trump's tariffs while Unifor and the Canadian Steelworkers cheer on counter-tariffs.

Tariffs drive up prices. When people buy less, less gets made, and when less gets made, they lay off. That is all tariffs will ever mean for workers in an

economy where a single piston crosses the US, Canadian and Mexican borders six times, as one of the slides we showed makes plain.

AJ recalled that in 2023 the Detroit Three contracts expired on both sides of the border for the first time in 25 years, and that both Fain and Unifor's Lana Payne refused to coordinate the contract struggles. Now, Stellantis is closing the Brampton plant and moving the work south while Fain applauds.

The bureaucracies of every union have run on a nationalist basis for decades. That is all they know. The reps at Solidarity House are detached from the floor. If they don't clock in, nobody notices and the line doesn't go down. International unity is a threat to their position, because a struggle workers can actually win is not what they are there for. They are there to orchestrate a sellout and go back to their positions.

AJ added a point I should have made myself: the strike funds are invested in the same companies on the stock market. So are the UAW's assets. When you are a capitalist, you do not side with the workers over the shareholders.

"YOU WOULDN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT IT IF IT WASN'T FOR THE RANK-AND-FILE COMMITTEES"

Fernando, an autoworker at GM Silao in Mexico, where workers refused overtime in solidarity with the 2019 GM strike here, said workers have to study their contracts even when the contracts fall short. "Otherwise the unions are going to continue doing their thing, playing tricks on us and imposing the conditions that we work under." He asked how workers in Mexico can fight united with workers in the United States and Canada.

I answered with my own plant. Mack has built a factory in Monterrey, and the local officials at my plant are still campaigning against it when it is already built. You cannot stop that. You can only unite with those workers and fight the company together. Not through tariffs, not through nationalist division. That is how workers in the US have lost more than a million auto jobs since 1979.

We have to be the ones who shine the light of history on what was lost and which policies lost it, and not forgive or forget. The meeting itself, with workers from Canada, the US and Mexico on one call, was the beginning of the answer. We are already building it, now we just have to continue the work.

Ruth, from the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, first met me last year in Detroit at the rank-and-file investigation into the death of Ronald Adams Sr. at the Stellantis Dundee Engine plant. She described two letter carriers who died on their routes and lay in the street for more than six hours before anyone knew; four deaths at a Georgia postal plant with no cell phone service; and a Detroit worker who fell into a mailing machine and was not found for six hours.

Two of those deaths, she said, were scrubbed from the internet.

"Our union officials have been numb on all this," Ruth said. "You wouldn't know anything about it if it wasn't for the rank-and-file committees." Postal workers voted down their last contract by 87 percent. The current one has been expired since May and the union is taking it to arbitration with no vote at all. "What Will's campaign has shown me is that the working class is the only way we can move forward and get the safety we need, the pay we need."

Bill, a track worker and member of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, said his carrier announced record quarterly profits and, two weeks later, the elimination of a thousand maintenance-of-way positions. "They give you a 3 percent raise, but inflation is 10 percent. That's a 7 percent pay cut." Then he put the whole meeting in one sentence. "I have more in common with my Mexican worker brother than I do with an American billionaire."

"THE ISSUE ISN'T TECHNOLOGY. THE ISSUE IS WHICH CLASS CONTROLS IT"

Tom, a leading member of the Nexteer Workers Rank and File Committee, said that if I win he wants me in Detroit dismantling the bureaucracy, and that committees should run their own candidates for

shop committee and bargaining positions. I want to be clear about why I have said I will keep my job at Mack. It is not a retreat. The power is already in your hands on the floor.

I cannot maneuver inside the UAW on my own to achieve what we are talking about. It has to be done by workers alongside me, moving together. I am not a reformer, I am talking about overthrowing the shareholders.

Tom also reported that layoff notices went out at Nexteer on Friday in the areas that supply Stellantis, possibly through November 16. Workers have told the campaign about unusual downtime at the Detroit Assembly Complex in Jefferson and the threatened loss of the third shift at Windsor. And Stellantis has now said Belvidere, which Fain sold as the biggest win of 2023, will not reopen before 2028, the year the contract expires. The cuts are coming for all of us.

Anna asked what our program is against job cuts driven by AI and robotics. For decades the UAW has accepted the company's arithmetic that fewer hours mean fewer workers. Our answer is the opposite.

If fewer hours are needed to do the work, then **we need a shorter work week at the same pay.** That fight has to include the engineers and white-collar workers whose jobs are being handed to AI. One brother summed it up in the chat: the issue isn't technology, the issue is which class controls it.

A chart we showed made the point. The richest 0.1 percent, about 137,000 households, now hold 15 percent of the wealth in this country. The bottom half, 67 million households, hold 2.3 percent.

Every recession since 1980 has shifted more of it upward. That is how you explain capitalism: the constant enrichment of a tiny minority of shareholders at the expense of the majority who actually produce the wealth.

WHAT I ASK OF YOU

One worker in the chat asked how to build this movement in the face of apathy. **I do not think workers are apathetic.** Look at the rejection of UAW-backed contracts, the strike authorization votes in the high 90s. Workers want to fight. What is lacking is a clear way forward and the leadership to take it.

So here is what I ask. **Find the coworkers who agree with you on these points. Write down the truth about what you see on the floor. Contact my campaign,** and we will help you build your committee and get your founding statement out. You will find workers you did not know shared your views, and you will find that workers want to fight.

The count begins this week. Whatever the results, I will keep fighting alongside you. We produce all the wealth in this society. Shareholders cannot produce a thing without us. It comes down to what each of us does on the shop floor. That is what will determine our way forward.

Watch the full recording of the October 4 meeting and the September 20 meeting. To build a rank-and-file committee in your workplace, contact the campaign.

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR WORKERS' POWER!

Get involved with the rank-and-file campaign in the UAW elections.

willforuawpresident.org/get-involved